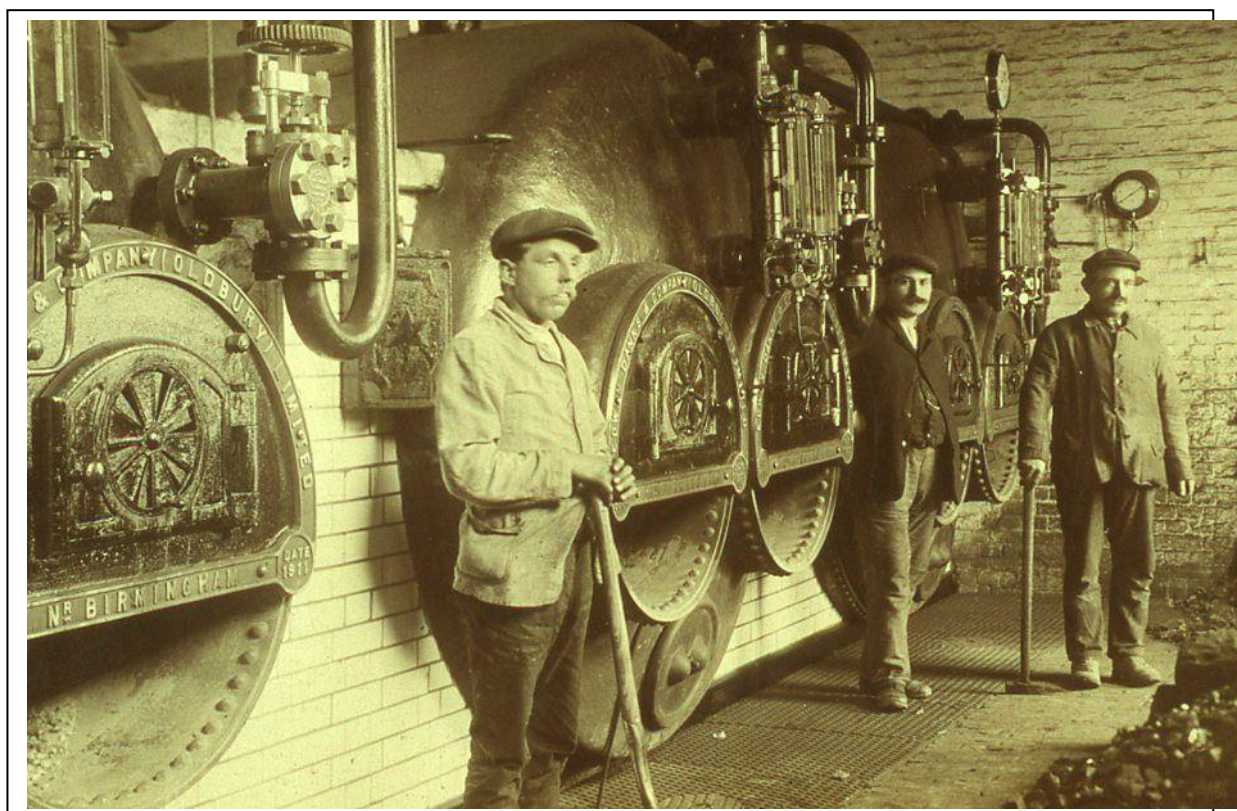


Cambridgeshire Fen Drainage Scrapbook 1897 to 1990

Facts, Features and (occasional) Fallacies
reported in Cambridge Newspapers

summarised by

Mike Petty



Hundred Foot Drainage Engine boilers c1910

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Most of these stories originally appeared in the Cambridge Daily/Evening/News or the
Cambridgeshire Weekly News, its sister title.

They are supplemented by some articles published in the
Cambridge Independent Press or Cambridge Chronicle

Most were featured in my 'Looking Back' column in the Cambridge News from 1996-2014

The complete 'Cambridgeshire Scrapbook' of which this is a small section is published online at
bit.ly/CambsCollection

<https://archive.org/search.php?query=creator%3A%22Mike%20Petty%22>

I have digital and other copies of most of the stories summarised.

Many may be read on Flickr in Albums headed 'Cambs News'

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/153171359@N04/albums>

The original volumes are housed in the Cambridgeshire Collection at Cambridge Central Library
where there are many other indexes dating back to 1770.

They also have detailed newspaper cuttings files on over 750 topics that have been compiled since the
1960s.

Newspapers sometimes get things wrong. I copy things out incorrectly. Do check

There are a multitude of spelling and layout errors. Please forgive or correct them

News never stops but this file was finished on 31 August 2016.

I will maintain supplements and corrections – contact me for anything you need

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See my website – www.mikepetty.org.uk for further notes.

Mike Petty, Stretham

2018

Fen Drainage extracts from Mike Petty's "Cambridgeshire Scrapbook"; see also *Cambridgeshire Fens Scrapbook* which has stories not connected with drainage issues

1899 02 23

Inspectors of the Local Government Board held an inquiry at Newmarket respecting the proposed new main drainage schemes for the district. The sewers had been a source of difficulty and trouble in consequence of its faulty construction. The present sewage farm had caused constant complaints. The method of exposing sewage in trenches or ditches to stagnate was so very unsatisfactory that it was likely to cause a serious nuisance. Last year a scheme had to be abandoned in consequence of the Burwell Fen Commissioners objecting to the discharge of effluent on their fen

1903 11 30

The unprecedented rainfall has taxed waterways beyond their capacity and floods are the natural consequence. In Cambridge boathouses have been invaded by the flood and the ferries have stopped plying. The flood has taken possession of Sheep's Green and part of Coe Fen while the Upper Granta has inundated many acres of pasture. In the fen country the dykes are full to overflowing and the land clogged with water, while in St Ives there are floods to a considerable depth covering hundreds of acres. 03 11 30

1908 03 27

Ouse in flood, sheep drowned Fenstanton – 08 03 27

1908 04 03

A Witcham labourer had been employed to look after the sluice doors of the Mepal catchwater drain. After he was dismissed the gates had frequently been obstructed. He was seen deliberately dropping pieces of brick into the sluice, preventing the doors closing automatically. In the event of a high tide it might have resulted in the flooding of the Fen lands, involving very heavy damage. He was fined the enormous sum of £100 plus costs.

08 04 03a

1910

1912 04 05

Mr G. Carmichael was appointed resident engineer by the Middle Level Commissioners in 1863 following the flooding at St Germans. He became superintendent of the South Level, then Bedford Level Corporation, Padnal and Waterden and Roswell Pits Commissioners. In 1891 he was also appointed superintendent of the Ouse Outfall Board and Caudle Fen Commissioners, in 1900 of the Middle Fen and in 1909 the Norfolk Estuary Commissioners. After retirement he was elected to the Ely Urban District Council and any advice he gave on drainage matters was treated with importance. 12 04 05d

1912 08 30

Littleport suffered badly in the heavy and continuous rain. The rushing water from the Hemp field flooded the main street between the Granby Hotel and Hitches Street, running into the shops of Mr Fitch and Mr Secker. The steam fire engine made some attempt to pump the water away, but was not very successful. At Haddenham the inhabitants were aroused by the 'Town Crier', Mr Pope, who called upon every man to go down to the Cut Bank or the fen would be 'drowned'. After toiling for hours with railway sleepers the danger was averted. But the crops were partly submerged and the water entered farm cottages forcing several families to beat a retreat 12 08 30n

1912 08 30

The Mile Bank at Littleport has been flooded as never before since the draining of the fens has been carried out by machinery. When the Fen engines needs overhauling the work is invariably carried out in the summer when, under normal circumstances, their services are not required. It is a slice of bad luck that it is undergoing repair just when it is wanted and hence water is remaining on thousands of

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acres. The Commissioners are taking steps to substitute another kind of engine. Meanwhile harvest operations are out of the question except where the labourers are working in top-boots 12 08 30o
Floods Swavesey, Cottenham, Royston, Melbourn, Arrington, Histon, St Ives – 12 08 30h

1912 11 15

Occupiers of low-lying land in Swavesey will be glad to learn that important steps have been taken to lessen the damage caused by floods at the Swan Pond and High Street. Doors will be erected at Over Bridge to stop the Bedford water from flowing into Cow Fen. The six cottages at Turn Bridge, the occupants of which have to flit on the occasion of a high flood, will no longer be in danger of inundation. But four cottages at Church End and another at Ramper Road have been condemned as insanitary although there is no other housing available and so the disturbed residents will be offered the hospitality of the workhouse 12 11 15f

1912 11 22

Pumps of the new engine installed at Ten Mile Bank by Littleport and Downham Commissioners were started for the first time. It was 1819 when they erected their first engine here, it was of 30 hp driving a water wheel. This was replaced by an 80 hp engine in 1840 with new boilers in 1878 and bigger scoop wheels two years later. The drainage of the future would be more difficult owing to the land settling in some places and several drains would have to be diverted to avoid the hills. 12 11 22

1913 05 30

Ebenezer Driver, an Isleham gravel and shingle merchant told the court he owned 16 lighters and a steam tug. He'd delivered eleven lighter loads of sand and gravel to Southery for the Methwold & Feltwell Drainage Board to use as concrete at the pumping station. Heber Martin, surveyor of Littleport said he'd measured the barges and worked out the amount supplied. Joseph Whitehead said he'd carted it from the lighters. But the Board disputed the quantity. The suggestion that being fenland it had acted as a quick-sand and swallowed up the materials could not be accepted since the ground was so hard people could not get a pick into it. It was possible more sand and gravel had been used in making the concrete than they'd allowed for. 13 05 30 p8 CIP

1913 07 02

Not within living memory have the famous Wicken Fens been so completely flooded as they are at present. The district presents an appearance reminiscent of the Broads, for as far as the eye can see in many directions only the top rails of the fens and the hedgerow tops are visible. It is feared that much damage has been done in this "entomologist's paradise" 13 07 02 p11

1913 07 04

Cottenham drainage commissioners report that a large amount of coal has been consumed due to the heavy rains and floods. The driver of the Smithy Fen engine had about 60 tons of coal in stock and the engine needed repairing. Some drains were in poor condition: on one occasion while water was lowered two feet nine inches in the drain at the engine it was only reduced three inches at Half Moon Bridge. Both engines should be repaired 13 07 04 p12 CIP

1913 10 03

Following the destruction by fire of the Burwell Lode pumping engine at Upware in January the old engine was overhauled. It was restarted after six weeks and the pump kept going meanwhile by two heavy traction engines. But it was not quite strong enough to work the huge pump and in times of heavier floods difficulty had been experienced in coping with the water. Now a new one made by Ruston and Proctor of Lincoln has been delivered to Upware by road. Considerable difficulty was met with installing it as the station has not yet been rebuilt from the fire. The engine is much smaller so the walls have been lowered and a temporary roof erected. It worked very smoothly although the pump had been standing for over three months it raised the water in half the ordinary time 13 10 03 p11 CIP

1914 01 16

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There has been an eternal struggle in the fens between drainage and navigation: the Highlander wants to get his flood water off rapidly and by so doing floods the Lowlander out. The navigator wants deep channels and in making them withdraws the natural support for the banks which slip and silt up his deeper water again. Parish awards make elaborate provision for maintaining ditches but the County Council has no powers to maintain natural rivers free from obstruction and the issue of underground water rights is difficult. Now an inquiry called after the disastrous flood of August 1912 has started taking evidence from various bodies. 14 01 16c, d & I

1914 11 27

New machinery installed at the Hundred Foot pumping station just beyond Pymore was formally opened. The new plant supplied by Gwynnes cost £3,000 with another £1,100 for work on the engine house. It is a high-pressure compound engine and a vast improvement on the old engine and scoop wheel. The fens had subsided and got so low for the old scoop wheel and it became impossible to grow potatoes. Decision hastened by the great flood of 1912 when water rose to the bands of the wheat shocks, potatoes and onions completely covered. . Had been pumping plant since 1829. In 1881 the scoopwheel was enlarged. Now had two good sets of pumping machinery, one at Ten Mile Bank 14 11 27

1915 01 09

Fen floods approaching those of 1897; fen engines are going at high pressure and the tall smoking chimneys attest the efforts of man to save the fenland as much as possible. Ten Mile Bank engine, erected 1913, is doing splendid work as is the new machinery installed two months ago. In Ely Cutter Inn wavelets approach entrance and on other side of river an old cottage cut off... Two cottages near the railway bridge are flooded, orchards in Willow Walk, the sewage tank and rod-peeling sheds are all surrounded. At Prickwillow crack appeared in part of the bank, gaulters despatched to give an extra layer of gault. Feltwell bank broke flooding area. Barges unable to pass under Littleport bridge and all vehicles, horses and cattle were ferried. In construction new bridge the road was made up on either side. In 1897 water invaded the lower portions of Victoria Street ... Prior to building of the new Ely High Bridge flood water usually flowed over the Stuntney Road Waterside Quay flooded some days and people in Babylon can take boat almost to their doors. Joseph Martin relates 1796 flood as recorded by grandfather – bank gave way and water came to within 100 feet of main street of Littleport; also 1852 when sheep drowned in Southery Fen 15 01 09

1915 01 29

West Norfolk fenland floods are developing alarmingly. Under the pressure of the high tides the new protective dam at Hockwold breach has collapsed and the water is running over Southery Fen in great volume than ever. Several cottages have collapsed. Residents who escaped with their bedding in boats passed the night in Southery Schools. A number of houses in Southery village also became flooded. Floating furniture is being salvaged by boats and the main London road is impassable 15 01 29

1915 02 05

Floods ... water still rushing through bank of Lt Ouse near Hockwold ... water now 9ft deep. Several of the older or less substantial cottages have now collapsed and others are expected to fall. The furniture in St Peter's Mission Church in Methwold is floating about in the building. The Little Ouse burst its banks on Jan 3rd and although £2,000 has been spent on the work of closing the gap the flooding has not yet been stopped 15 02 05

1915 02 19

The floods are still rising in Southery Fen where a number of men set off in a boat to salvage furniture from a submerged house some distance from the main road. The gale increased in violence and the occupants of the craft became alarmed. They managed to steer the boat to a hayrick, the top of which remained dry. On getting alongside they climbed to the rick and there spent the night, exposed to the fury of the gale and suffered severely from the cold. As they did not return relatives became alarmed. At daybreak the men were seen clinging to the hayrick and no time was lost in rescuing them.

Through the bursting of another bank, a further three thousands acres have been added to the flooded area 15 02 19

1915 04 03

Norfolk floods, Southery area cover 20 square miles; nothing to see but devastation, tons of potatoes in a sea of water. Many smallholders face ruin. When return home after some months have to procure new furniture. Relief fund formed 15 04 30 p3

1915 05 07

Norfolk flood relief fund set up Ely – farmers had suffered badly ... never seen such desolation ... 266 families affected 15 05 07 p2

1915 07 09

Cottenham fen drainage commissioners new engine for Smithy Fen to be bought 15 07 09 p6

1915 07 23

Southery floods – repairs of Lynn to Ely road; no money to strengthen banks 15 07 23 p3

1915 07 30

Danger of floods – if bank had not burst and flooded Methwold Fen it would have given way higher up 15 07 30 p4 & p7

1915 12 02

Ouse Drainage new authority for navigation, taxation and administration and for better drainage and embankment – were too many sections and needed a larger authority with wider powers; banks of Ten Mile River of insufficient width; powers of South Level Commissioners limited; perhaps a relief channel from Littleport Bridge to Hundred Foot 15 12 02 p8 CIP

1916 05 01

Southery flooded and 20,000 acres submerged – photos – 16 05 10b

1916 06 21

New Ruston drainage pump at Cottenham – photo feature – 16 06 21b

1917 07 11

Fen drainage and the Ouse outfall – to consider report by A.H. Case but not refer to one by E.G. Crocker; urgent need of improvement, should be new body to deal with river above Denver – 17 07 11a, 17 07 18b

1918 03 06

Fen drainage and Ouse outfall – Crocker disagrees with Case report – 18 03 06a

1918 04 24

A great flood, higher level than has been recorded since the great storm of August 3, 1879 Miles of country were under water on Wednesday; roads and paths were rendered impassable to foot passengers, the ferries at Cambridge were stopped, low-lying houses and premises near the river were flooded and the water was up to the permanent way of the railway between Chesterton and Waterbeach. The river has shown more frequent tendencies to flood of late years than, formerly - one cause is said to be the clearing-out of ditches and water courses by War Agricultural Committees 18 04 24 CIPof

1919 02 12

Fen drainage; report of Sidney Preston on merits of rival schemes; condemns Case's scheme of training walls seawards and points out inefficiency of number of drainage authorities each working

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alone. Problem is a national one; suggests put Ten Mile and Hundred Foot rivers in good condition, repair banks at outfall, dredge Eau Brink and Marsh Cuts, shut out tides by locks – 19 02 12a

1919 02 26

Serious Floods. Not for many years has the County of Cambridge been visited by floods of such magnitude or of so serious a nature as those experienced within the last ten days. Thousands of acres are under water, and at Cambridge the water rose at one time to within six inches of the height reached by the memorable flood of 1879. At Ely the river touched a depth beyond any previously attained within the memory of the oldest inhabitants. It is good news to hear that since Sunday the water has been steadily falling. A serious break in the river bank midway between Waterbeach and Upware last Wednesday resulted in the disastrous flooding of hundreds of acres of low-lying land in the vicinity, the temporary isolation of several farms and cottages and considerable damage to stacks. On Tuesday night ... above the banks at Waterbeach Fen where the break in the river bank occurred, and farmers took prompt steps to remove their stock to safety, but on Wednesday morning a break occurred, and the breach rapidly becoming wider, the water poured through. Farm buildings and cottages were surrounded, and the inhabitants in some cases were forced to seek shelter in the village. All Wednesday farm workers and other helpers from Waterbeach and district worked up to their knees in water, but the gap widened, and it was found necessary to sink two barges in the breach. Thousands of sandbags were requisitioned and by this means the hole was filled and the inflow of water at this spot checked. Men have been employed night and day in "cradging" along the banks and strengthening the places where any water was found overflowing, this also being done on the Stretham bank of the Old West 19 02 26 CIPof

1919 03 12

5,000 Acres Under Water. In consequence of three serious breaks in the banks caused by the recent floods, it is estimated that about 5,000 acres of farm land, including some smallholdings, are still under water to a depth of from 2 ft. to 5 ft. in Cambridgeshire. In places the water stretches as far as the eye can see, cottages, farm buildings, stacks and just the top rails of gates showing out of the water. The breaks which occurred in the banks holding back the water resulted in large areas, hitherto regarded as safe from the inroads of flood water, becoming inundated. The damage has been most extensive and in some cases tons of produce, particularly potato crops, have been rendered almost valueless. The places where the banks gave way were (1) at Barway, on the Soham Lode, (2) at Waterbeach Fen, on the river Cant, (3) at Stretham and Thetford Fen, on the Old West River. The worst break was probably at Barway, where the bank apparently gave way from underneath, after being undermined by the water. Huge portions of the bank were torn away by the rush of water and can be seen now dotted about in the floods like little islands 19 03 12 CIPof

1919 03 19

Problem of the Ouse Valley and impact of recent floods; detailed report – 19 03 19a

1919 05 14

Prevention of floods; drainage of basin of Gt Ouse; scheme proposed by Board of Agriculture; propose form single Drainage Board – 19 05 14e

1919 02 26

Serious floods, river bank gives way between Waterbeach and Upware, worst in living memory, men cradging on Stretham bank and Old West. One cause is clearing of streams above Cambridge last summer and accumulation in the river-beds below. Dredging scheme needed; photos – 19 02 26a & b

1919 08 20

Improving land drainage; Board of Agriculture is about to lose the German prisoner labour used to good effect on agricultural drainage. Was lent to the Board free of cost and cannot be replaced. Work will be carried on by the local drainage authorities with rating powers. They worked in districts where there was no drainage authorities. Worked on Upper Ouse and tributaries, on Anglesey marshes, Blackwater and other Essex rivers. More will have to be done with machinery of Canadian type. River

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Ouse is badly shoaled and sections between Denver Sluice and Brandon Creek extremely congested. Preliminary had labour well in hand and three dredgers will soon be working. New Ouse Drainage Board will continue work – 19 08 20c

1919 10 08

Drainage of the fens; Board of Agriculture & River Ouse order for single drainage authority drafted – 19 10 08a

1919 10 22

Drainage of fens – enquiry into proposed scheme and formation of one drainage board – 19 10 22f; conclusion – 19 10 29c

1920

1920 01 07

Bottisham & Swaffham Drainage, commissioners' financial difficulties; £10.000 flood damage last year; interesting inquiry; former owner of Anglesey Abbey had made arrangements to divert certain water which passed in front of his house ... Swaffham drainage system the most expensive ... in 1853 the fen people promised the high land people they could conduct the water along the Lodes instead of allowing it to run into the Fen- Ch 20 01 07

1920 04 14

Washes flooded between Upware & Ely, drainage engines in Burwell fen working at full pressure, men patrolling in thigh boots

1920 11 03

Criticism of dredging in Ouse between Denver & Wissey; dredgers totally unsuitable; had sunk, drew stuff to wrong side of river – Ch 20 11 03

1923 10 26

Representatives of the various drainage districts through which runs the Old West River assembled at County Hall, Cambridge, to consider a scheme for cleansing the river and repairing the banks. The work was one of the unemployment schemes proposed by the Ouse Drainage Board. Mr A.E. Wright said the river had been in a deplorable condition since 1917. Captain Matthews said that in April 1922 the river was surveyed and was very much stilted up, and the banks were 18 inches below the maximum flood level, so that it was a very serious matter. 23 10 06

1924 02 01

Frederick Hiam told the Ouse drainage board that a number of banks were in bad order. In Burnt Fen there were several places in the banks leaking badly. In the old days two gangs of lighters were at work, but since the Board had taken the matter over nothing had been done. Who was responsible if there was a break? If we had another inch of rain we should have had the fens flooded. If there was 20 feet in of water in the river there was not a bank safe. They would soon be a million pounds in debt, if they had to pay compensation for damage done 24 02 01

1924 02 19

At a meeting at St Ives to discuss the Ouse Drainage order Mr Wheeler said there was a vast difference in draining lands below sea level and those above. The test was a simple one. If you took all the fens works away, the fens would suffer, but St Ives would not; therefore the work was for the benefit of the fen land. But the scheme proposed that the uplands should first of all pay for works done in their own district, and in additional pay towards all the works done in the fens whose works were obstructing the flow of our water out to the sea

1925 01 16

The third and final distress sale ordered by the Ouse Drainage Board took place. 25 lots including crops, gold watches, bean drill, milk cooler and other articles were offered for sale but they were all withdrawn, as the bids did not go beyond one shilling. The first lot to be offered was a sporting gun. After the crowd had sung "Rule Britannia" a shilling was bid. The lot was withdrawn. The next lot met a similar fate. The crowd then gave a pathetic and heart-stirring rendition of "Shall we gather at the river". After this the proceedings were enlivened by a series of solos played by the happy possessor of a tin trumpet. A silver biscuit barrel was next. Instead of bidding the crowd sang(?) "To be a farmer's boy" and "John Brown's body" followed by "Tipperary". When the auctioneer called for "three cheers" for the Ouse Drainage Board the response was "three boos 25 01 16

1925 05 18

The Ouse drainage question is still a burning topic in Soham. Two bailiffs visited a farm at Soham fen to demand rates amounting to £29. Apparently the money was not forthcoming for one of the bailiffs went over to a barn and taking down a halter which was hanging just over the top of a mangold cutter said, "I seize this". A tall, well-built young lady of 16 also seized hold of the halter, and a struggle ensued during which she struck her arm against the mangold cutter, bruising it. Another young lady then came on the scene and struck the bailiff on the nose, causing blood to flow. Farmers think the Ouse Drainage Board was forced on them by the Government and that Soham is being asked to pay for works which benefit other towns who were not asked to contribute 25 05 18

1925 12 05

Lively scenes took place at an intended auction sale of goods distrained on the instructions of the Ouse Drainage Board for non-payment of the rate. Some 30 men attended the sale at Scales' Hotel, Milton Road, Cambridge. As soon as the auctioneer opened the sale there was loud cheering, followed by a continued hubbub. Accordions were played more or less melodiously, the shriek of penny whistles rent the air, and mouth organs and toy trumpets added to the general pandemonium. A Welsh pony was trotted out from the stable, its back covered with a large Union Jack and was run to and fro to the sounds of much music amid a constant flow of racing terms. It was also sternly admonished to 'keep its tail up' and was confidently dubbed next year's Derby winner. No bids were forthcoming 25 12 05

1926 01 08

Ely and low-lying parts have luckily escaped any serious encroachment from the flood waters passing down the River Ouse. On Monday the river reached its highest at 16 ft 9 ins, the normal being 13 ft 6 ins. Denver sluice was a godsend, for had it not been for the fine manipulation of those sluices another two to three feet would have been recorded at Ely. Along the 100 ft Bank however and between the Old and New Bedfords, the flood water stretches for at least 20 miles. Many parts around have suffered, but no serious damage is reported 26 01 08

1926 01 16

There were lively scenes in East Road, Cambridge, when another "sale" of goods distrained by the Ouse Drainage Board for the non-payment of rates was to have taken place. A "jazz band" quickly attracted a crowd to the scene and the sight of 30 men attired in top hats, paper hats etc, caused considerable amusement. Some had toy trumpets, some hunting horns, some penny whistles while a few motor hooters added to the "harmony". Attempts to conduct the sale were drowned in a general uproar and all the lots were withdrawn 26 01 16

1926 06 30

Lively scenes were witnessed when Cambridge was "invaded" by visitors from Soham who came to protest against the sale of goods distrained by the Ouse Drainage Board from Barcham Farm for the non-payment of rates. No one could mistake their "leader", Mr A.E. Elsdon, who was attired in "cap and gown" and wore a large buttonhole of sweet Williams, supplemented by a rhubarb leaf. Another wore a slightly battered "topper" and enthusiastic supporters had rattles, concertinas and "screechers". A blind man in charge of a street organ had been hired and did his work thoroughly 26 06 30

1926 07 19

One of the greatest enterprises of the age in the fen district in draining 16,000 acres of land has been accomplished by the Burnt Fen Commissioners with the formal opening of the new oil power plant at the Lark Pumping Station at Prickwillow. The Blackstone engine connected to a Gwynne centrifugal pump will cost £400 a year to run, a saving of £1,000 over the old steam plant 26 07 19

1926 09 10

St Ives Council River Committee reported that a cross head had given way at the Staunch, wrecking one of the gates and causing a fall in the river; repairs had been carried out. They communicated with Mr Simpson, the owner who replied: "There seems to be some misunderstanding. Your council rent the staunch which comprises the lock and pen. In times gone by the lock had only one pair of gates (the second being put in when the navigation was restored about 1850). The barges came up the river and made fast just above the pen and flood gates; the gates of the pen were then shut and the flood gates lowered, and when sufficient water had come down the boats proceeded to the next lock. Would the council care to buy the whole structure? They would then not have to spend money on other people's property" 26 09 10

1926 12 31

The Great Ouse River Board heard that a number of stages had been erected on the banks of the Ten Mile River and the Wissey for loading sugar beet. The banks in many cases had been cut. Furthermore in loading the beet on to barges a quantity of earth was allowed to fall into the river. It should be made clear this should not be done without the approval of the Board. Sir Fred Hiam proposed notices be printed so the factories could send one to each farmer who contracted with them to supply beet. 26 12 31

1927 11 12

The Ouse Drainage Bill was rejected by a Joint Committee of Parliament. It was proposed to construct training walls, embankments, sluices and deepening channels and rate – differentially as between uplands and lowlands – the whole of the watershed from Oxford to the Wash. It was the adequacy of even this elaborate scheme and the apportionment of the cost which provoked strong opposition. Experts reported that if the proposals were not carried out "the danger of the district returning to its original condition of swamp is very real". 27 11 12

1927 11 25

The awkward position of the members of the Ouse Drainage Board on account of the rejection of the Drainage Bill led to lengthy discussions. The uplander, the fenlander and the lowlander were opposed to that Bill, the forces against it must have been tremendous and the rejection was a surprise to the Government officials who drafted it. They hoped that the new Bill that came forward would be from the fen people themselves, the trouble with the last one was that it came too much from above 27 11 25

1928 01 07

A break 35 yards long in the bank of the Little Ouse river, two miles below Wilton Bridge near Lakenheath, occurred shortly after midnight. The Ouse Drainage Board engineers are on the spot with boats laden with gault and a gang of men are working hard to stop the leak. The floods are still rising in the Fen district. The situation is serious but no further breaks are reported. The banks are being carefully watched and weak spots have been strengthened and it is hoped they will hold out.

1928 01 10

Reports from the flooded areas in the Fens show that the water is gradually subsiding. The position at the break in the bank of the River Wissey at Hilgay was unchanged. Water was still pouring through the gap and no attempt could be made at present to stop it. The arrival by rail of 10,000 more sandbags is being awaited. Men are in readiness to begin work on filling the gap as soon as the water level admits. At present the rush of water is too great 28 01 10

1928 01 27

The Ouse Drainage Board discussed the breach of the bank of the River Wissey. It was said the cause was the action of the sluice-keeper at Denver in not opening the new eye during the floods. But the reason it had not worked was that the frost was so severe; the sluice was pulled up and great difficulty was experienced in getting it down as the grooves were covered with ice. When the thaw set in the door was eased and had worked splendidly ever since. The floods were caused by the large flow of water down the Cam and the other three rivers into the Ten Mile. It was the highest flood ever recorded at Denver Sluice, three inches higher than in February 1919 28 01 27

1928 04 27

The Ouse Drainage Board heard that great damage was done to the banks of the rivers during the January floods and some £15,000 will be necessary to put them in the state they were previously. The Ministry should be induced to make some contribution to the cost. The flood, which was accompanied by a strong gale, damaged 47 miles of the banks of the main rivers and 16 miles of the smaller rivers and lodes. Mr Tebbutt said that during his knowledge of the river for 50 years only on three occasions did he remember as much flooding as on the last occasion. It was exceptional 28 04 27

1928 10 23

The chairman of the Ouse Drainage Board came in for some heckling at a meeting at Cottenham. After the disaster in Southery Fen in 1915 and 1916 the work of the Board had saved the entire South Level from being flooded last winter. But Mr Wright-Graves said the value of the land had been brought down from £25 to £10 an acre. The tax was more than the occupiers could bear and it would be better to have a flood once in seven years. 28 10 23

1928 12 21

The Ouse Drainage Board heard the mud and refuse from Ely Sugar Beet Factory was clogging up the river so that even tugs could not get through even with no boats in tow, except on a channel ploughed day after day. The water was being held up towards Cambridge and there was serious danger of flooding. It was a waste of money to have dredgers in the Ten Mile River getting the mud out when it was being put in faster by the Beet Factory. Thousands of tons of mud were going into the river and it was a scandalous affair. The whole of the river between Ely and Denver Sluice had a thin coating of slime all over it and was the consistency of a mud-pie. It will not be the Ouse Drainage Board much longer if this goes on: it will be the Ouse Drowning Board. 28 12 21

1929 03 26

An inquiry was held into proposals by the Ouse Drainage Board to carry out work at Welmore Lake Sluice. The Ministry had agreed to fund one half of the cost of £30,000 but local ratepayers objected saying it was unfair to expect them to pay so large a sum when the work would benefit many others. The sluice had been constructed about 1825 and benefited the Middle Level as it prevented the tide coming up against their barrier banks. Methwold and Feltwell Drainage Board protested against payment for a sluice which would confer not one penny benefit on them. They were being asked to 'hold the baby' and it was rather too lusty an infant for them to hold. If the cost were spread more fairly it would only amount to an 8d rate and no one would feel the pinch. 29 03 26

1930

1931 04 10

St Ives residents are concerned they will be deprived of the use of their river this summer because of engineering repairs at the stanch. The continued low water is not only ruinous to the boating industry but will also affect the acreage under osiers. At present the engineers had only put in a pair of fen gates, which was the easiest task of the lot. They should leave the remainder of the work until autumn. But very soon repairs would be started at Hemingford Lock 31 04 10g

1932 01 29

In the fens thousands of acres of land are below sea level, dependent on internal and main river drainage works for their existence. They paid heavy Internal Drainage Board rates in addition to Catchment Board precepts. But land bordering the river above Earith and Cambridge derived benefit by that work but did not pay. The fens could no longer bear the cost of carrying their water to the sea. It needed very large sums to put rivers into satisfactory condition and make good the neglect of the last 100 years, but Government revenue had disappeared. 32 01 29

1932 03 31

Methwold and Feltwell Internal Drainage Board was in a bankrupt condition; it owed £10,000 and could not find the money to run the pumping engine. There was a risk of flooding 25,000 acres of the finest fenland in England. Many other boards were in the same condition. The whole of the fens had cost more than four times their value in draining. 32 03 31 & a

1933 01 21

St Germans' Sluice was opened in 1877 but the fens continued to shrink as drainage progressed and the tideway silted up. Once there was a four-foot fall from March whereas now there was practically none and a north-west wind could affect the outfall by two feet. The new pump was probably the largest in the world. The men working on the huge scheme were glad to have jobs in such depressed time. 33 01 21 & a

1933 09 22

An inquiry into the new Ouse Catchment Board byelaws heard objections from Railway Companies. Their bridges might be damaged by storm or flood and signal wires blown down but they would be unable to repair them without permission: was their traffic to be held up while they got consent. Huntingdonshire County Council felt they would prejudice the growers of bat willows 33 09 22

1933 09 21

Sir Frederick Hiam was concerned that if the pumps were stopped his land would be flooded. Some simply floated at such times: when a horse went on the land it went up to its neck and had to be dragged out with ropes. In 1912 the banks held but in 1928, after the Ouse Catchment Board took over, there was a break. His men were out all night to prevent the whole district being flooded. The Board can give an order, but they haven't the men to do it. The man on the spot knows what to do, people in Cambridge did not. 33 09 21, 22, 23

1934 09 11

The new sluice and pumping station in the Middle Level at St Germans is a really wonderful piece of engineering, probably the biggest of its kind in the whole country. The drainage of the fens has resulted in a general settlement of the land which is now below the waters in the Ouse. Now there is a reinforced concrete sluice and three Gwynnes pumps driven by Crossley Premier Diesel engines to overcome the problem. 34 09 11

1934 09 29

St German's pumping station opened – 34 09 29

1935 04 26

Burnt Fen Drainage Commissioners presented James Luddington, formerly of Audley House Littleport, with a silver salver on his retirement as Chairman after 50 years. His father and grandfather had filled the post before him back to 1849. Sir Frederick Hiam said this was unique in drainage history of the fens. They were now one of the best-drained districts for which Mr Luddington deserved the greatest credit 35 04 26a

1935 10 02

As a result of neglect of the river trees had fallen into the Great Ouse and the accumulation of silt had formed islands. In some places it had been difficult to find a river at all and some 500 miles had been cleared out. The River Board was endeavouring to keep a channel clear but weeds were a problem.

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The whole of the South Level is settling due to improved drainage by modern pumping machinery but the high river banks are also settling, faster than the fens themselves. At Denver the inrush of water brought in silt from the Wash meaning the bed of the river was rising, the Catchment Board's engineer reported. 35 10 02

1935 11 22

With the heavy rainfall of the last few days Fenland has to thank the vision of those who planned the pumping station at St Germans for the fact that there has been no flooding. The new sluice has pumped 2½ million tons of water and but for this the rivers would have risen six feet. Although the banks could have withstood the pressure, much water would have leaked back from the banks into the dykes so that the Internal Drainage Districts have been saved much expense. The Middle Level need not fear three times the present rainfall as the pumps were only working at a third of capacity. 35 11 22a

1936 02 04

Widespread flooding occurred at Huntingdon and St Ives which one motorist says looks like an island. The water in the Old West is within eight inches of the top of the bank and these are being heightened with clay on the low places. There is also heavy seepage on the Wissey, all along the Middle Fen banks, at Southery Ferry and the River Lark. All banks are being patrolled by day and night with tugs and barges in readiness to deal with any emergency. 36 02 04b

1936 09 04

Dispute over dyke in Grunty Fen at Whitecross Road, Wilburton – 36 09 04b

1937 01 27

Flooding at Ely High Bridge – photo – 37 01 27

1937 02 16

An inquest heard that a bargeman's son had been in the habit of visiting the Half Acre pumping station at Barway. This had been erected in 1935 and contained a 10 horsepower crude oil engine. The engineer in charge said the lad had been standing with his back to the engine, looking out of the window. He was wearing a mackintosh which became caught in the flywheel. The man had run to stop the engine but the wheel took the boy round four or five times and his head hit the concrete. The flywheel had a projection for fixing a starting handle and this was not guarded. All other drainage engines were larger and let into the floor 37 02 16a

1937 03 15

The next 25 hours are the critical period in the fight against flood waters which are threatening a large area of fenland near Littleport following the recent heavy rain and high spring tides. A night and day watch is being kept on the rivers around Denver Sluice. Dredgers and barges are standing by ready to stop any gaps. The water has been over the banks in several places, but so far there has been no breach. Flood conditions have prevailed for eight weeks now – the longest period in living memory. The superintendent of Mildenhall Fen pumping station had no sleep over the weekend where the sodden condition of the banks has heightened anxiety. 37 03 15a

1937 03 16

A great battle is going on over a 50 mile front to save the fens from serious flooding. But in the minds of the hundreds of men working on strengthening the sodden banks is the ever present question 'Will the banks hold?' Despite their efforts the Old West River at Aldreth Causeway overflowed and nine inches of water poured into Haddenham Fen causing people to leave their houses. Great anxiety was also caused when water came over the banks at Willingham and at Lt Thetford where a split occurred in a bank 37 03 16 & a; photos – Prickwillow, Earith, Stretham, Ship Inn – 37 03 16c

1937 03 18

Threat to Barway following Lode burst – 37 03 18 & a

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Soham Lode breach – photo – 37 03 18b

1937 03 19

Workers at the end of their tether – 37 03 19 & a

1937 03 20

New peril in the fens – River Lark, Hiam inspects – 37 03 20 & a

1937 03 23

The present flood conditions in the fens were raised in the House of Commons. A titanic struggle was going on between man and relentless nature. Children had been unable to go to school for months, housewives were marooned and unable to provide themselves with the necessities of life, crops had been destroyed bringing ruin to farmers and unemployment to farm workers. Half a million acres of the richest soil in the country were in daily peril during the winter. Much of the flooding had been caused to Government cuts in grants for land drainage, Arthur Greenwood declared 37 03 23

1937 03 23

Easter Sunday will be zero time in the second phase of the great battle being put up against the flood peril in the fens. Ten days ago the calamity of a major burst was only narrowly averted when the spring tides were at their peak. This weekend they return. Today all the cracks in the bank of the Old Bedford River were reported to be satisfactory and airmen who had been working day and night have been withdrawn. The spirit of the troops is excellent but the medical officer has certified that rum is desirable and arrangements are being made for it to be issued. 37 03 23a

1937 03 24

James de Rothschild, MP for the Isle of Ely, ridiculed reports about problems in the fens. The pictures that had been conjured up of whole villages in a fever of anxiety for their lives and even of a panic-stricken population fleeing from their homes clutching their valuables, were totally fictitious. One village was said to have been evacuated but a very successful Liberal meeting had been held there. However despite the aberrations of the press the situation was still very grave and hundreds of acres were threatened with flooding. 37 03 24 & a

1937 03 24

Army return to fens, cracks in Ouse at Redmere – 37 03 24b

1937 03 27

The Ouse Catchment Board received a telegram from the King and a letter from the Minister of Agriculture saying they had watched with admiration the heroic efforts made to control the fen floods. Sadly a breach had occurred which led to the flooding of Soham fen. Last year Padnal had asked for a new engine but it had been turned down. As a result the old engine had broken and fens were under water. Unless something was done the South Level was heading for the greatest calamity it had ever known. 37 03 27a & b

1937 04 05

Fen floods and compensation, new road at Soham Mere – 37 04 05

1937 04 21

Fenland is alarmed at another rise in the level of the rivers following heavy rain. The water is now 4ft 6in above normal, the washland is again flooded several feet deep. But the absence of rain so far today gives hope that a further disaster may be avoided. Even so the position is serious. Many fenland farmers have been unable to get on their land which is still completely waterlogged and much will have to lie fallow for a year, as it is too late to sow crops. 37 04 21

1937 04 21

Cambridge Photographic Club cine group presented its annual show. Mr W. King's "Flood" was a magnificent epic of the recent Fenland troubles with some really brilliant photography. "Close of the Day" recalled some of the scenes witnessed in Cambridge every afternoon at 5 o'clock and showed the evening's life of a typical couple. Humour and trick photography are the keynote of the film which was written and directed by Mr F.B. Ives and produced by Mr E.J. Twinn. 37 04 21a

1937 04 30

During the peak of the floods the river in Littleport rose to such an extent that several layers of sandbags were laid along Lynn Road to keep the water in. But a crowd of 250 people in a 'rough temper' had started to remove them. They claimed the bags had caused their houses to be flooded out and they didn't see why others shouldn't be flooded as well. They'd tried to stop River Board officials replacing them. This was a very serious matter as it would have harmed many people and caused damage in the fen 37 04 30b

1937 05 08

During the last three months as much rain fell on the high lands as fell on the fen land. There has been much more damage to the high lands than ever was done to the fens and thousands of acres will never have a spring crop sown this year. The damage to the high lands is many thousands, compared to the fenlands' shillings and pence. But the Middle Level fen men put up a very fine advertising stunt, they are the finest Press agents that ever were and a tremendous lot of rot had been written about what had happened in the fens, Councillors were told. 37 05 08

1937 06 10

Nine men who worked on the fen banks at Soham Lode during the recent floods appeared in court charged with stealing a shovel each, the property of the Great Ouse Catchment Board. Several of the men said they had lost their own shovels and took another as 'compensation'. One said he had picked one up and taken it home, burying it in a sack in his back garden after he'd been told he would not get any money for his work. The Board had bought extra shovels which had been handed out before being branded; about 40 had gone missing along with 30 lanterns. 37 06 10a

1937 07 14

During recent floods the water in the Hundred Foot Washes had been held up causing great hardship to occupiers. Yet their drainage charges have greatly increased. The water is let into the Wash area through the Seven Holes Sluice at Earith. But Welmore Lake Sluice which had only been built about five years is unable to cope. The Hundred Foot should be dredged: at Littleport it was only 30 feet wide. Alternatively the water should be let through the Hermitage Sluice into the Old West River and then out at Denver Sluice. But the washes were there for the express purpose of taking flood waters and grazing land was hired under those conditions. The problem is that rivers in the uplands have been cleared meaning water arrives in about a day, whereas it used to take a week. 37 07 14 & a

1937 09 29

Work on the improvement of the Wash estuary would be very expensive and not only benefit drainage. It could not be undertaken with funding from the Government, but they had no powers to take over the Wash without legislation and that would have no hope of passing. The Ouse Catchment Board were unhappy to have such a liability imposed that not one of them would have thought of accepting. The scheme was an experiment so far as the drainage of the fens was concerned and it would be impossible for internal drainage boards to raise the money. A start should be made on improving the outfall and a large scale scheme for the reclamation of the Wash kept in reserve 37 09 29a & b

1937 10 01

The Great Ouse Catchment Board considered anti-flood schemes costing over £300,000. Work was in progress on the Old West bank between Aldreth Causeway and Willingham flat bridge, and on Soham, Swaffham & Lakenheath Lodes where weaknesses were found during the spring floods. Draglines have been hired from several contractors as have several miles of railway track and over a

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hundred tipping wagons. At Manea they have opened up another clay pit and started re-facing the bank but have had to cross over several watercourses and make several substantial bridges. 37 10 01a & b

1937 10 27

Journalist H.G. Hodder told Rotarians he'd started his career at the CDN. He'd reported on the birth of the St Neots quads and on the death of King George V when he was one of 60 reporters crowded into the Feathers at Dersingham waiting for the news. He'd been accused of overdoing the 1937 floods but it was a good story at a rather quiet time and imaginations were stretched slightly. However it meant that the Government did begin to think what might happen in the Fens unless protection is improved 37 10 27

1937 11 08

Sir – I have 4,000 acres in Mildenhall parish so derelict that they cannot be farmed and bring ruin to the families who try it. Given one road to join the five cul-de-sacs and a bridge over the River Lark to a similar road in Cambridgeshire, all these families could get their sugar beet to Ely factory. If the counties won't share the cost of a bridge, a mile of Suffolk road would save the bank where it broke and temporarily corked itself one Sunday morning. It was almost a miracle that the fen floods did not culminate in a great and tragic disaster. But the banks and roads remain bones of contention in various stages of deadlock – Rev J. E. Sawbridge, vicar 37 11 08

1937 11 26

The banks on the Reach, Burwell and Wicken Lodes should be raised and the main engine drain widened, the Ouse Catchment Board recommended. At Upware the old scoop wheel, engine and boilers should be sold, the building demolished and a new pump installed. Very few banks had broken in the fens in the last 20 years but those at Soham Lode had broken twice in the last 15 years. Last week the slips were very bad indeed. The County Council were pumping water from Soham Mere Farm into the lode - instead they should pump direct into the Cam 37 11 26 & a

1937 12 08

Over 20 fen men appeared in court for non-payment of Swaffham and Bottisham Drainage Board rates. One said it was nearly impossible for him to pay. "For two years we have been absolutely flooded out. We have a little corn remaining but cannot get a threshing machine down there because of the conditions left after the flood. We are next door to bankruptcy". Another said the farm he occupied had been under four feet of water for three months. The Great Ouse Catchment Board had taken over the district and a new pump had been ordered 37 12 08a

1937 12 08

W. King took film of fen floods last spring – 37 12 08

1938 01 11

Mr W. King showed three of his films at the Dorothy Café. The first dealing with the fen floods of 1937 had been seen before but the others were new. One showing the inspection of the Cambridgeshire Regiment by General Kirke caught the spectacle admirably: the marching of the Territorials was transferred to the screen in colour and many town and county notabilities were seen. Another showed the demonstration given by the Cambridge Women's Physical Culture Club, concentrating on the beauty and grace of their movement and showing the great advance they have made in the art of keeping fit by easy, pleasure-giving exercises. 38 01 11a

1938 01 28

The Great Ouse Catchment Board wanted to complete work on the Marsh Cut, extend the training walls into the Wash and improve the river between Denver and St Germans. Great work in the past has drained the fens, now they needed to keep the tidal waters out. But they would not proceed without further Government help. The fens had become a very valuable national asset and if a national emergency arose they would be of incalculable value. The Hundred Foot Washes had been flooded

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time after time for the benefit of other areas and that was absolutely ruining it. Half the wash was derelict but although owners could not let their land, they were called on to pay heavy drainage rates. 38 01 28b

1938 02 14

Fen dwellers again had to fight the threat of flood caused, this time, by a surge in the North Sea which resulted in an abnormally high tide sweeping up towards Denver from the Wash. The waves broke over the southern bank of the New Bedford River and the inner side began to slip away. An SOS for volunteers was flashed on a cinema screen at Downham Market and many in the audience rushed to the scene in lorries, cars and motor boats. More than 300 people, women as well as men, worked by the light of oil lamps in an effort to stem the overflowing waters. 38 02 14

1938 03 15

Padnal Fen road at Ely should be finished 18 inches above the existing level to allow it to be better drained. Since the road lies under the bank the pressure of water percolating under it might cause the surface to break up as happened during the recent flood. The filling under the road should have porous material but if this is too expensive then there should be a row of field pipes under the road at the toe of the bank with drains every 200 feet, Ely council was told. – 38 03 15a

1938 05 26

Cawdle Fen Drainage Commissioners were sued by a farmer whose land was flooded in 1936 and 1937 when water flowed across the railway line. The sluice gates in the lock had been worn out for years and water leaked back into the fen. The drains were grown up and had not been 'mudded out' for some time. The gauge on the pumping station was out of place because the fen had sunk. In Lt Thetford they had stopped the old paddle wheel and installed two efficient pumps and it was not possible to drain Cawdle Fen without pumping. But the Commissioners said the system could not be expected to cope with abnormally high flood conditions 38 05 26 & a

1938 05 27

There is a real danger that there may be a break in the South Level barrier bank. It was in a very dangerous condition. Since a slip in February bags had been put on it but no gault had been used to repair it. Unless something is done before the high tides come next winter there may be a great disaster. In 15 years there would be another demand to raise the banks because the fens had fallen and the sea had remained the same. But they had so many schemes they had run out of money, Commissioners heard 38 05 27a & b

1938 07 23

A farmer claimed his land at Wissington, near Stoke Ferry, had become waterlogged and flooded as the pumping machinery was quite inadequate and broke down frequently. An engineer said the engine was of an old type and the boilers were not strong enough to drive the pump properly. But the Ouse Catchment Board said they'd got a new drainage plant since it broke down in June 1938. Any problem was due to excessive rainfall and seepage from the river Wissey. Although some celery had rotted there was no damage to wheat. 38 07 23g

1938 07 29

The Great Ouse Catchment Board says £1.3 million must be spent on strengthening the banks of the Hundred Foot river between Denver Sluice and Welmore Lake, lining and dredging in the Eau Brink and Marsh Cut, construction of an intermittent barrage and training work in the Wash. The people who live in the fens are unable to pay for them so the Government will contribute 75% of the money. The fear was that they were spending money on a scheme which might not be an effective solution to the problem 38 07 29 & a

1938 10 19

The tenant of Alderbooke Farm claimed damages from Cawdle Fen Commissioners over flooding. Their pumps were insufficient and inefficient, their lock gates were excessively leaky and their dyke

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walls were not high enough. The judge agreed. The Commissioners had a duty to inspect, maintain and care for all their drains and drainage works and keep them in good condition. They did not have a sufficiently powerful pump nor spend enough on rebuilding banks. But the Act merely authorised them to do the work, it did not direct them to do so. The claim was dismissed 38 10 19b

1938 12 24

A farmer from West Row was fined for making and constructing a dam at no.6 culvert, Cooks Drove Drain, Mildenhall Fen without the consent of the Fen Drainage Board. The obstruction caused a settlement of the culvert heading causing a crack in the brickwork. The farmer said he'd put a board in the drain to supply water to his cattle 38 12 24

1939 01 12

The Old West River is very narrow and in normal conditions appears slow, lazy and far from dangerous. But now it has risen above its low banks, covering the washes and lapping against sandbags placed along the A10 road near Stretham Ferry Bridge. Four barges are tethered to willow trees, loaded with gault to mend the banks. It is a scene reminiscent of what happened here in 1937 when water ran across the main road to the low-lying fields beyond. A little more snow or rain will cause flooding 39 01 12b

1939 01 13

Ouse Catchment Board men have reinforced the bank running alongside the road on the Cambridge side of the bridge over the Old West River (at Stretham). The Old West River is at this point narrow but now it has risen above its low banks, and is covering the washes which extend from the normal water's edge to higher banks running parallel. Four large barges are tethered to willow trees. They were brought up from Ely loaded with gault to mend the banks. A little more snow or rain would bring it over the main Ely to Cambridge Road. The Ouse at Holywell is over its banks. The flood position at Welney yesterday showed little improvement, with 3ft. 6in of water over the road across the wash. Flooding is most severe at Brandon Creek and in the Hilgay area. 39 01 13 CIPof

1939 01 28

The fenland flood situation is very serious, with water six feet above normal. Patrols are watching the banks day and night and additional engineers have been sent in. At Littleport and Prickwillow waters have encompassed a number of properties and the occupants are preparing to evacuate. With further rain there would be as serious a threat of flooding as in 1937. Pumps at St Germans were operating at full throttle and Denver is pumping 11 out of 12 hours 39 01 28a Flood photos at Earith – 39 01 25, aerial pictures 39 01 28

1939 01 27

The Ouse Catchment Board agreed a scheme for Roswell Pits showing the proposed lay-out of the buildings, dock, roadways etc at a cost of nearly £5,000. Any old iron that may be on hand at the depot should be sold off. At present the yard is used mainly on the South Level Scheme but the time had come when it should be used for the general work of the Board. 39 01 27b

1939 01 28

Aerial pictures of flooding in fens – 39 01 28

1939 01 30

Flood precautions at Manea – pics – 39 01 30

1939 01 31

Flood levels in the fens remain high. At Waterbeach the Town Crier made a call for volunteers and rallied forty men to work on the banks of the Bottisham Lode. At Littleport station sleepers are covered and only the tops of the lines are showing. Goods trucks are standing with water beneath them. In the Holmes inhabitants have left before their houses were surrounded. At Swavesey Mow

Fen and Middle Fen railway gatehouses have had to be evacuated. 39 01 30a pic Holmes flooding – 39 01 31

1939 02 01

Men at Barway worked in mud and water through the night to strengthen the sluice gates which divide Soham Lode from the main river. One large barge loaded with clay was wedged in the mouth of the lode. But when the bank burst huge clods of earth weighing many hundredweights were blown out by the water. The edges of the gap are so sheer and straight that they might have been cut out by a gigantic knife. With the earth went sandbags and all manner of other material used to strengthen the bank. Tarpaulin sheets had been stretched over the top of the bank and held down by weighted sacks. Parts of these are now lying in the water swirling through the gap 39 02 01 & c

1939 02 02

Throughout the night 300 men patrolled between 3-400 miles of the banks of the Ouse, Cam and Lark. The patrols, equipped with field telephones are part of the extensive flood prevention scheme organised following the floods of two years ago. News of the gradual decrease in the water level has brought relief to scores of families who had abandoned their houses. A number have returned by boat to their homes at Barway and Soham and set about restoring order out of the chaos created by the water 38 02 02

1939 02 03

After a week, the position in the Fen country is now easing. Throughout the night 300 men patrolled the banks of the Great and Little Ouse, Cam and Lark. These patrols, equipped with field telephones, are part of the extensive flood prevention scheme which was organised by the Catchment Board following the floods two years ago. The scheme is now playing a vital part in defensive measures against another flood menace. The news of the gradual decrease in the level of the flood water has brought relief to scores of families, who had hurriedly to abandon their homes. When the flood waters dropped nearly a foot a number of families returned by boat to their homes. At Barway, where five families hurriedly evacuated, men were building a dam to relieve the pressure of Water on the gates of the lode. Steel piles are being driven into the bed of the river. 39 02 03 CIPof

1939 02 08

Flood waters from the Ouse at Littleport have caused residents of a number of houses in the Station Road area to either evacuate their homes or live upstairs. It is not the first time this has happened and despite protests nothing has been done. Now ratepayers are demanding action. The council are proposing to build a concrete wall, three feet high. But residents from the Holmes believe this would flood their properties even more. Sewage matter from the homes was emptied on the gardens and it would be easy for bacteria to get into the flood waters 39 02 08a

1939 02 11

In March 1937 flood waters breached Soham Lode, causing thousands of pounds worth of damage. This year the same bank gave way to the enormous pressure of flood water, bringing a further trail of havoc. Natural seepage and pumps have cleared this away but at Swaffham Prior Fen about 1,000 acres are under water caused through seepage from the banks of the Lodes. Pumps have been going day and night but still farms are isolated and cattle have had to be moved. Distress warrants are being issued for drainage rates but farmers won't pay because they haven't any money 39 02 11

1939 02 24

A report proposes a new drainage canal about six miles long, between the Ten Mile River near Denver Sluice and a finishing point near St Magdalen's Bend on the tidal river. The water would be controlled by sluice gates at both ends with a battery of irrigation pumps. This canal would only be used in times of severe floods allowing water in the Ten Mile River to flow interrupted down the new canal, the old sluice at Denver being kept closed. The storage capacity would be sufficient to cope with the accumulation of water during high tide. 39 02 24

1939 03 31

Lands in the South Level are in greater peril of inundation than ever before owing to the rapidity of flood waters flowing down from the upland due to improvement of the upland water courses and because Denver Sluice in time of flood is impeded by water passing through the Hundred Foot River. The report by Sir Alexander Gibb should be examined, the Ouse Catchment Board was told. But the Board's engineer had criticised it. "This is the most inefficient body I have ever sat on, far worse than the most incompetent parish council", one member complained. 39 03 31 & a

1939 05 12

Sir Murdoch MacDonald was appointed consulting engineer to the Great Ouse Catchment Board to report on the whole programme of the tidal river and whether a barrage is the right solution to the problem. He had worked chiefly in Egypt, built a bridge across an estuary in Scotland and was now working on a large harbour scheme on the West coast of England. He also had considerable experience in carrying out work on the Wash 39 05 12

1939 05 15

Sir – my criticism of the appointment of Sir Malcolm MacDonald as consulting engineer with the Ouse Drainage Board is that he is 72 years of age. This is rather old for such a tremendous undertaking since the Ouse is probably the most difficult river problem in the world. He is also a Member of Parliament and may not have time to give to the work. And the fee seems a lot. Mr O. Borer, the Board's skilled, resident engineer, is hampered by having so many Saturday afternoon members of the Board who adopt a parish pump attitude. – S.S. Wilson 39 05 15

1939 08 11

Cambridge-Lynn Canal. A new canal from Cambridge to King's Lynn is being considered by engineers of the Great Ouse Catchment Board as a permanent solution to fen flooding. At present, however, the scheme is "in the air." Surveying is being undertaken to see if the scheme is practicable, and if it is found that it is, a full report will be submitted to the Board at a later date. It is probable that the new canal, if it is decided upon, will run from near Cambridge, via Mildenhall, Brandon and Stoke Ferry to Denver, and then to King's Lynn, a course which would take the surplus water from the highlands. The cost would be in the region of £2,500,000 39 08 11 CIPof

1939 10 20

Ouse Flood Water. In spite of the serious flooding which has occurred in the Midlands, where the Ouse and Grand Union Canal have overflowed their banks, there appears little danger that the Cambridgeshire Fens will be greatly affected. Mr. Oscar Borer, Chief Engineer to the Great Ouse Catchment Board, said that although the level of the water at Newport Pagnell is 7ft above normal, the flood waters of the Ouse have not reached Bedford, and they should be dispersed before they can get down to the Fens. He added, too, that all the washes were empty. 39 10 20 CIPof

1939 12 01

Ouse Catchment Board agreed that a pumping plant be installed where the Soham Lode enters the main river. As this was not possible before winter portable pumps should be readied in case an emergency arose 39 12 01a & b

1940

1940 02 14

H.C. Darby 'Drainage of the fens' book review – 40 02 14c

1940 03 29

During the last winter they had been through four serious floods, and had not had the dangers they'd had in other years. The sluice keeper at Denver had never seen the water go through as fast as it had this year. But the banks are much stronger now than at any time within the memory of living man, H.G. Martin told the Ouse Catchment Board. If no pumping station was installed at Upware it would be necessary to raise the banks of the lodes by five feet and taking the settlement into consideration

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the costs of maintenance would be £4,000 pa. The pumping station would cost £5,000 and the existing banks would be topped. Previously the practice had been to put in a puddle trench about six feet deep and to complete the lode banks on this basis would cost a further £5,500 40 03 29a

1940 04 26

New drainage engine to be installed at Oxlode and oil engine should take the place of the Hundred Foot steam engine. Grunty Fen drainage to be improved meaning water comes at faster rate. A new engine at Oxlode would pump straight into the Hundred Foot and save it going 12-13 miles. Steam engine was extravagant; £378 spent on coal for 316 hours of work – 40 04 26a

1940 09 27

Macdonald scheme for flood protection fens – includes ‘cut-off channel’ from Grantchester to St Germans – 40 09 27b

1940 10 15

R.G. Clarke, chief engineer Middle Level who saved fens from flooding resigns. He designed St Germans pump – 40 10 15b; funeral 40 10 29a

1940 11 30

Ouse River Board, W.E. Doran appointed engineer – 40 11 30a

1941 01 24

Fighting Fen Floods. The Special committee set up by the Cambridgeshire County Council to consider Sir Murdoch Macdonald's scheme for the protection, of the Fens against flooding. The report features the three methods of approach which have been put forward at different times by different people. The methods are (a) Deepen the Tidal River. This is possible only if silt is prevented from coming in from the sea. It therefore means either a barrage to keep salt water and silt from entering the river or an extension of training walls to deep water, (b) Divert the water at Denver into a new channel parallel to the Tidal River. At some point nearer on the sea it would have to be pumped into the Tidal River. (c) Remove the upland waters to a new channel on the edge of the uplands, the new channel discharging below Denver and being available to receive (by pumping) the water awaiting discharge at Denver 41 01 24 CIPof

1941 05 29

Ouse Drainage scheme being delayed by serious shortage of labour; not enough for ordinary maintenance work – 41 05 29a

1941 12 04

Great Ouse Catchment Board report and accounts publication prohibited because enemy might obtain information for operations against the country – 41 12 04

1942 07 03

Murdoch Macdonald Ouse flood scheme explained – 42 07 03a

1944 07 05

New fen drainage pumping station opened (name not given due censorship) – 44 07 05

1945 03 21

Drainage history lecture – mentions 1877 Bill that each river and its catchment area should be under control of one authority but this rejected; also later debates – CDN 1945 03 21a, b

1946 03 02

Highest flood between Jesus Lock and Baitsbite Lock was 1917 when nearly two feet water over office floor; river bank broke Brandon Creek and flooded fen around Southery which quickly cleared water at Abbey Road – H.C. Banham – 46 03 02b, 46 03 09a

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1946 07 08

River Lark overflows banks at Isleham – weeds block flow; teams battle on banks, NFS pump water –
46 07 08

1947 03 10

A night with one degree of frost, followed by the warmest day of the year, and then a night with no frost at all. This was Cambridge's weekend experience. This morning at half-past ten it was 35 and still rising. Work on snow clearance proceeded throughout the week-end in both borough and county with the result that all main roads are now open both ways and all by-roads passable. "We are hoping for the best" said Mr W.E. Doran, engineer to the Ouse Catchment Board this morning. He was asked about the prospect of flooding and explained that at present there is only a slight increase in river discharges. But a quick thaw will no doubt cause floods in the upper reaches. There is no immediate danger of a crisis in the fens because there is a very large storage area available. "If the thaw continues slowly there is a very good chance of it passing off without undue trouble" 47 10 03 c

1947 03 14

Cambridge has been hit today by some of the worst flooding for 30 years. The rapidly rising and flowing river has invaded riverside homes, Midsummer Common and other open spaces are flooded, there have been fears for the safety of Silver Street Bridge, and there is no sign of any diminution of the abnormal flow. There is an unconfirmed report that the Byron's Pool sluice has broken, and Grantchester Meadows and the "Backs" are completely under water. Silver Street was closed to all traffic during the morning. There were fears that the rush of water would seriously affect the foundations of the bridge. Street lighting was switched on in Linton when residents of houses in Meadow Lane and Chapel Terrace made a hurried evacuation of their waterlogged homes. The water rose to well over knee-deep but was subsiding this morning. At Sawston the sub-power station was marooned and electricity was cut off this morning. The Great North Road beyond Brampton is under water and the A.A. scout at Brampton cross roads was "up to his knees" at his post this morning, p4

1947 03 15

Old West flooding, Cambridge-Ely road closed, p4
Floods Newnham, p5

1947 03 17

In the still of this morning's sunshine there was graphic evidence all over the county of the devastation caused by last night's gales which produced tornado-like gusts screaming over the countryside at a velocity of 99 m.p.h. A tree fell across a Prisoner of War hut and Hemingford Abbots and seriously injured the occupants. When a tree crashed on a P.o.W camp at Whittlesford two Germans were injured. The complete roof of the kitchen of Downing College, Cambridge was blown off., p1, p2
Evacuation warning in fens, Ouse bank goes, p7

1947 03 18

Hundreds of men and women, troops and German prisoners among them who worked throughout last night are still pitting their efforts against the biggest flood threat of all time. The breach at Over today widened to over 20 yards during the night and at about 1 o'clock this afternoon water began to pour over the top of the Old West. River bank at Haddenham. The break at Lt Thetford yesterday afternoon flooded over 2,000 acres, p4

1947 03 19

The bank has burst at Ten Mile Bank and on the River Wissey and water is pouring through a thirty yard breach. A huge area of fenland is involved and livestock is being evacuated. Another breach has occurred in the bank of the Old West at Stretham and water is pouring in a torrent into Waterbeach fen. The waters of the Cam have dropped seven inches at Clayhithe but a break in the bank is feared about a mile and a half beyond towards Ely 47 03 19
Tortoise rescued from flood, p5

Over's ordeal, German Prisoner of War killed Hemingford Abbots, p7

1947 03 20

Over 200 men of the Beds. & Herts. Regiment were still working after nearly 24 hours with little or no respite in their fight against the rushing water from the breach of the Wissey. Throughout the night they filled sandbags by the light of hurricane lamps stacking them in a seven-foot wall along a mile stretch of the Ely to King's Lynn road south of Southery. The total area affected by the flooding is now more than 100 square miles 47 03 20

Fen floods affect 100 miles, p5

1947 03 21

An attempt was to be made this afternoon to rescue a bull marooned since Monday in a stall at Crane's Fen farm near Earith. It was hoped to borrow an army "Duck" for the attempt. Mr J Cook said it was standing in about two feet of water. "It seems quite happy but it may prove different when we try and rescue it. The job will not be easy as the animal weighs at least half a ton" 47 03 21

Fens crisis area, p1

Aerial views, p10

1947 03 22

"Operation Neptune", the scheme to seal the great gap in the banks of the River Ouse near Over by using Neptune amphibians began this afternoon. Nine Neptunes - weighing anything between 37 and 40 tons each - are being employed, as well as submarine nets and sandbags. One has its nose against the bank several yards from the breach and a number of others are in a field about half a mile away on the other side of the river. They will be brought to the gap, line up across the breach and netting will be dropped from them. Tarpaulins will be fastened over the netting and weighted down with sandbags. 47 03 22

Southery breach, p1

Earlier floods recalled, p6

1947 03 24

Under the glare of "artificial moonlight" "Operation Neptune" was successfully put into effect last night. Nine great amphibian tanks have sealed the breach in the River Ouse at Over. It was the first of its kind ever to be performed in England. The whole area was reminiscent of wartime, crowded with duffle-coated mud-caked troops many of them tired out but still cheerful enough to sing, and military equipment of every description. The operation was due to start at 5 O'clock but owing to technical hitches it was late evening before everything was ready to commence 47 03 24

1947 03 26

Ready at a moment's notice to help clear floods in the fens, 50 National Fire Service pumps are standing by in London awaiting the call from Cambridge. Up to midnight on Saturday last 600 pumps had been engaged for more than 3,000 pumping hours and 78 million gallons of water have been moved. Meanwhile fen river levels generally continued to drop today. The flow of flood water from the breach in the Ouse near Earith has been completely halted. 47 03 26c

1947 03 27

It is thought it may only be a matter of weeks before the fens are drained again. Where pumping stations are out of action auxiliary pumps will be installed while other will operate from the various banks taking water from the flooded fens back into the rivers. Hundreds of millions of gallons of water will have to be taken off the flooded areas. The biggest fen pumps can throw 35,000 gallons a minute. Amongst offers of help received at the Catchment Board office is one from Liverpool of an unlimited quantity of dehydrated potatoes for use in filling the breaches. 47 03 27

1947 03 29

On the subject of suitable cropping in the fens the National Farmers Union said today that provided that certain of the lands are drained within a month cropping may be possible - but one must bear in

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mind that the residue of artificial manure will have been completely washed away. Should the yield be low it would represent a financial loss and Government should guarantee them an average seasonal price on an acreage basis 47 03 29

1947 04 10

Flood clearance pumping is now being done by individual farmers in many places in the fen district. Some 25 small pumps have been issued from the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries pump depot at Warboys. The depot maintains a "flying squad" which goes out day or night should any of the pumps cease because of need for service. Since the depot came into being at the former R.A.F. Pathfinder airfield is had dealt with between 120 and 130 units. The depot started from scratch with just three bare buildings of the deserted airfield. It is now a complete unit with canteen, and administrative office, petrol supplies and even facilities for doing a certain amount of servicing of motor vehicles if necessary. No sooner had it opened than a stream of lorries bringing pumps, equipment and what one an described as "an odd assortment of pipes" began to arrive from all over England 47 04 10

1947 06 20

The fen floods and emergency payment to be made for damage done by them were the subject of discussion in parliament. The Ministry of Agriculture said it was a magnificent task on the part of farmers and workers to plant 1,950,000 acres of wheat. He mentioned that nearly 700,000 acres of agriculture were flooded. The floods were not due either to delay or negligence in carrying out drainage schemes, or to war-time drainage works carried out in the uplands. "We have no assurances that next winter nature may not break even the disastrous record of this year", he added. "Therefore much urgent work must be done if next year our river systems are going to be able to carry the volume of water that may descend on them"

1947 06 20

To-day, their work of pumping the floods off the Fens completed, National Fire service men who have been taking part in "Operation Fenland" left the area for their home station. The men were volunteers who came from all over England. One said: "It's good to be able to see some concrete results of the work in cleared land after so many weeks of seeing nothing but a vast expanse of water going down inch by inch". In many places you see a land of smooth, dried grey mud, cracked into many-lined patterns by the heat of the sun. There is an air of desolation in the now-dry flood-wrecked farms. Yet the hardy Fen people are already moving back.

1947 06 28

"Battle of Banks" published, p6

1947 07 02

Mr W.E. Doran, Chief engineer to the River Great Ouse Catchment Board, has announced plans costing £5,000,000 to prevent flooding of the Fens. The plans, which are described as being able quite definitely to give safety to the fens, are a modification of the scheme proposed in 1942 but shelved owing to the war. The 1942 proposal provided for the cutting of a new river from Denver to St Germans, with a balancing reservoir at Denver to accommodate the flow when the tidal door was shut. A new channel 30 miles long is planned from Denver to Barton Mills to cut off flood water from the high ground before it reaches the embanked sections of the fenland rivers. This channel up to the Lark is part of a previous scheme which provided for a cut-off channel going right up to Grantchester.

1947 08 09

Fens floods story broadcast, p6

1947 08 22

Further steps are to be taken by Huntingdon, St Ives, Godmanchester and St Neots, the four towns so badly affected by the March floods, to press home to the Government the urgency of some action being taken to mitigate further floods of these places. Mr W.E. Doran (Ouse Catchment Board Engineer) said that in his view the inhabitants of those towns were suffering from the sins of their

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ancestors in building houses in a flood area. At the height of the recent flood water was passing St Ives at the rate of 11,000 cubic feet per second. It was impossible to dig a channel capable of taking such an enormous volume of water. A new sluice at the paper mills, St Neots would improve the position for that town but would not stop flooding there

1947 12 01

How ant-flood scheme will work: McDonald scheme biggest project since Vermuyden; bank height limited by foundations which are 'a mixture of compost and toothpaste'; propose Relief Channel and Cut-off channel - 47 12 01

1948 02 20

An £8,000 new "weapon" was officially added to the "armoury" of the drainage engineers fighting the never-ending battle of the fens. It is a 360 h.p. two-stroke diesel engine installed at the Ten Mile River Pumping Station near Littleport. Of the kind also used to generate electricity in ships it is the first in the country to be adapted by the makers for land drainage. Coupled to an already-existing pump at the station it will help to throw fen water into the river at the rate of 200 tons a minute. It replaces a steam engine installed in 1912 48 02 20

1948 03 10

Welches Dam giant pump in fens, p7

1948 12 20

A further step towards the prevention of flooding in the fen area has been taken in the building of the Welches Dam pumping station which was officially opened and put into action. It had been decided that the reconstruction of the Low bank would be too expensive and there would be a continuous sinking of the peat fenlands behind. Comparative costs showed that a pumping station would be cheaper than building up the bank and be the most economical solution 48 12 20

1949 11 16

Scheme involving an expenditure of over £6 million to prevent further flooding in the fens were discussed by a select committee of the House of Lords considering the River Great Ouse (Flood Protection) Bill. It seeks to empower the Gt Ouse Catchment Board to construct works and acquire land. The total catchment area covers over two million acres of which 400 acres were fenland, the richest agricultural land in the country. The average annual value of the crops grown on the fenland was £50 an acre, compared with an average of £25 for the rest of the country. In the most fertile parts the annual value rose to as much as £100 an acre. 49 11 16

1950

1950 04 14

A new pumping station was opened at Chear Fen, near Stretham. Mr A.G. Wright recalled that the old station had opened in 1842. It had consisted of a beam-type steam engine powered by two boilers and coupled to a paddle wheel. It ran during the 1947 floods but only for a short time, when one of the boilers ceased to function and the other boiler only showed 35 lbs pressure. This plant was dismantled in 1949. In 1928 a new engine house was built, where a Blackstone Diesel engine was installed coupled to a Gwynne's pump 50 04 14

1950 06 16

Judgement was given for the Great Ouse Catchment Board on claims against occupiers for maintenance work on drains done under war-time legislation. A Leighton Buzzard woman said the board had dug some ditches on her land using Italian POW labour. They took much longer than English labour would have taken. Another said he saw a number of Italians rabbiting and never saw any of them working. George Stevens of Wing said ten or a dozen Italian prisoners came to do the work on his land. Asked if they cut any rushes, he replied, "the only things they cut were my trees to make baskets" 50 06 16

1951 01 12

Major Marshall Nixon, deputy engineer to Mr W.E. Doran at the Great Ouse Catchment Board, was the man who, in the 1947 floods, suggested sealing the Over breach with military amphibious load-carriers. His suggestion proved highly success and earned him the Institute of Civil Engineers' 25-guinea ingenuity prize for 1948. He was made works engineer during the big rehabilitation and damage repair works following the floods 51 01 12

1951 04 10

The Automobile Association reports several cases of flooded roads in Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire. The worst are at St Neots papermills but water which was ten inches deep on the main road at Caxton was down to four inches this morning. Highest of all rivers is the Cam with extensive flooding on Coe Fen and in the stream near the river on the Backs. There are patrols on the banks of the Cam and the Old West and at Ely the river is four foot six inches above normal.

1951 04 11

The threat of possible flooding of the Cambridge-Ely road at Stretham bridge has been met by the building of a quarter-mile long clay bank and the installation of three pumps. Mr W.E. Doran, the Catchment Board engineer said that the rainstorm that raised the level had travelled the length of the Cam basin & that with the present sodden state of the ground most of the rainwater drained into the river. Had the improvement work which followed the 1947 floods not been done river levels in some places would be above the danger line 51 04 11

1951 04 12

With some 16,000 acres of Cambridgeshire's wheat target of 50,000 acres still unsown and at the most only about a fortnight left to do the sowing, local farmers fear the possibility of a worst year than that of the 1947 floods. On many farms no spring sowing has yet been possible and work is anything from a month to six weeks behind. Mr C. L. Marr of Malton Farm, Meldreth reports that the heavy land there was waterlogged at the beginning of the week. Mr H.S. Kent of Chippenham summed up the situation in the word "terrible".

1953 02 13

High water levels on the River Cam have now dropped considerably at all points except at Bottisham Locks and all precautions for dealing with any emergency during the period of the Spring tides have been completed. A tide warning system will be put into operation; the number of patrols will be increased and emergency gangs, transport and materials made available at short notice. Coastal weather and tidal conditions are received by teleprinter at the Great Ouse River Board's Ely headquarters and police are ready to issue any necessary warnings 53 02 13

1955 07 16

The windmill at Adventurer's Fen, Wicken stands on a very isolated very isolated spot. The whole direction of the drainage was changed when the fen was brought back into cultivation during the war. It could never again work in that position and may have gone the way of its neighbour in Sedge Fen. But thanks to Rex Wailes and Mr Doran of the Great Ouse River Board it is to be repaired and moved to the entrance of Wicken Sedge Fen where it will be seen by visitors. The work has been entrusted to Mr C.J. Ison of Histon who himself moved the post mill at Madingley to its present site. The cost will be borne by Lord Fairhaven. 55 07 16c

1956 02 14

Since 1947 the Great Ouse River Board has spent £950,000 on strengthening and heightening the banks in the south level in their aim to prevent a recurrence of disastrous floods. Part one of the scheme involved the cutting of a relief channel from Denver to King's Lynn. Part two: the strengthening and heightening of the banks of the Ten Mile River and the deepening of the river will begin this summer and part three, a cut-off channel around the edge of the fens will start a year or two

later. But engineers are still not satisfied that if the same conditions reoccurred there would not be a break somewhere 56 02 14c

1956 09 22

A fen drainage windmill has been re-erected in Wicken fen. Norman's Mill stood in Adventurer's Fen, a mile to the south, and was operating until the early 1930's after which it fell into disuse and suffered considerable interference by people visiting the fen. The restoration was undertaken by C.J. Ison of Histon. They discovered the right way to go to work by trial and error, guided by what they found when they dismantled the old structure. Little more than the iron parts of the wheelers and gears remain from the original mill 56 09 22a & b

1957 07 27

The drainage of the fens moved into a new era with the opening at Upware of a fully automatic electric pump. Lord Fairhaven pressed a simple button to start it in motion. It is the first electric pump in the South Level and can move 125 tons of water a minute from Burwell Lode into the Cam. The existing pumps were 18 years old, were efficient and worked very well. But they would be unable to cope under abnormal conditions. 57 07 27

1957 12 11

Gt Ouse flood scheme details – 57 12 11

1958 07 04

Farmers and smallholders are facing serious financial losses caused by flooding at Cottenham fen. About 400 acres are under water and crops worth thousands of pounds have been ruined after a large public field drain on the boundary with Rampton burst its banks following days of heavy rainfall. Farmers say the drain had not been draglined for ten years but that the River Board had adopted a 'Blow you Jack' attitude and refused even to loan their pumps. 58 07 04

1958 09 19

The Great Ouse River Board's flood protection scheme between Ely and King's Lynn is nearly at the half-way stage. Work started in 1954 and part one, including an 11-mile long flood relief channel from Denver to Lynn controlled by a head sluice is nearing completion. The deepening and widening of the Ten Mile River and Ely Ouse over a length of 19 miles has been going on for a year but the flood diversion channel has not yet been put out to tender. People in the fens will feel a lot safer when it is completed. 58 09 19 & a

1959 10 24

In 1954 work began on a Great Ouse Flood Protection Scheme. The construction of an eleven-mile long relief channel parallel to the tidal part of the river was completed with the opening of a tail sluice at King's Lynn by the Duke of Edinburgh. He mentioned the great tidal surge of 1953 when over 1,000 acres of the Sandringham estate were flooded. Now a great anxiety had been lifted from many minds. The next stages involve deepening 19 miles of river as far as the Cam and the cutting of a new 28-mile long channel around the edge of the fens. 59 10 24 & 24a & b

1960s The Cambridgeshire Collection has detailed newspaper cuttings files from this date

1960

1960 01 15

Mr A.G. Wright, Chairman of the Flood Protection Committee of the Great Ouse River Board, has been awarded the OBE for his work in carrying out the huge flood protection scheme following the flooding of 1947. The channel outfall below the Tail Sluice is nearly complete and all work finished on the tidal river banks. Mattresses have been laid at the Wash barrier and contractors are now tendering for the third part of the scheme. "Only those who live in the fens can realise what it is to be flooded and what the effect of a protection scheme means", he said. 60 01 15c

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1962 05 16

The Littleport and Downham Drainage Commissioners first met at the Club Hotel, Ely, in 1756 and it was there they gathered for a celebration luncheon before driving five miles to Oxlade for the opening of a £65,000 all electric pumping station. Lord De Ramsey switched on two 320 hp motors capable of discharging 270 tons of water a minute. Together with two diesel-driven pumps they will serve one-third of the area they administer. Two more stations will be built near Denver Sluice and at Littleport to bring a big improvement to land that was suffering from poor drainage through the gradual wastage of the peat. 62 05 16

1962 09 27

Huge sluice gates have been constructed as part of the £10 million Great Ouse Flood Protection Scheme designed to save the Fens from abnormal conditions. They will control the peak flood waters of the Little Ouse, Wissey and Lark rivers and allow them to be fed into the new 27-miles long cut-off channel due for completion next year. The new channel starting at Denver and ending at Brandon Mills will also provide miles of new fishing facilities and a new waterway for sailing enthusiasts. 62 09 27a

1962 11 01

Littleport and Downham Drainage Commissioners approved a new pumping station at Wood Fen-North Fen, Littleport - 62 11 01a

1963 07 12

Surveys of the Ely Ouse and Ten Mile River have shown that protective works are necessary along considerable lengths of the banks. Trials had been made of various methods of protection using specially manufactured corrugated asbestos cement sheets rather than fagotting. To combat erosion protection will need to be continuous for 310 chains – more than originally estimated – over a 3-4 years period 63 07 12

1964 07 10

Water may be let into the Old West River without detrimental effect on water levels or danger to agricultural land. With dredging it is the only hope of preserving it so that the public could enjoy its fishing, boating and other amenities. New disposal works at Over would eliminate existing discharges of unpurified sewage but future development would more than double the amount of effluent entering the river and some fresh water should be admitted through Hermitage Sluice. But the height of the river was only just below the level of the washes and if more water were let through there would be trouble halfway down the river 64 07 10c

1964 09 18

A.G. Wright saw 1,700 acres of his land at Haddenham swamped by the flood of 1947. Since then he has worked to avoid a similar disaster. He has a wide knowledge of fen drainage and has been responsible for many improvements meeting the challenge of Britain's biggest drainage scheme in the same way as he introduced mechanisation into fenland farming – with knowledge and a realisation of the enormity of the task. Now he believes the flood ménage is beaten. In honour of his work, part of the scheme will be named after him 64 09 18a

1964 09 19

A chalk inscription claiming the Great Ouse River Board's £10 million flood protection scheme was a 'waste of money' had to be removed from the Lark Head sluice at Barton Mills before it was opened. It marked the end of ten years' work on the three-part scheme which has included a 27-mile relief channel skirting the edge of the fens, the widening of the Ely Ouse and Ten Mile Rivers and the construction of a new 11-mile relief channel from Denver to King's Lynn. It is as great an engineering feat as anything ever attempted in this country. 64 09 19

1965 03 26

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The Wash can be reclaimed by dumping 10,000,000 tons of ash from the Electricity Generating Board's coal-fired generating station into it each year, W.E. Doran claims. It would greatly increase the rate of land reclamation but care would have to be taken to ensure shipping channels were not impeded and that silt came in over the layers of ash to make the land agriculturally fertile. However this may be so expensive that it is not practical and water storage would be more worth while 65 03 26a

1966 09 23

Great Ouse River Authority open new HQ at Gt Ouse House, Clarendon Road; will be shortage of water; formed in 1920 to take over work Bedford Level Corporation – 66 09 23a

1966 12 14

Wash barrage plans not to go ahead say Government, farmers annoyed – 66 12 14c

1969 07 22

Waterbeach electric pumping station near locks in Ranold Road were installed last February, completed in May – 69 07 22

1970 02 05

Walter Lane photos 1947 fen floods to be centrepiece Cambridgeshire Collection exhibition organised by Mike Petty in Guildhall – feature – 70 02 05; exhibition sets up – Mike Petty, Alison Barker, Clare Beatty - photo – 70 02 11a

1970 06 25

Ely-Ouse – Essex scheme – feature – 70 06 25 & 25a

1974 03 15

In barely twenty minutes the chairman, Mr Leonard Childs, pushed sentiment and nostalgia firmly aside ... and by the close of the meeting the Great Ouse River Authority was dead and buried. It seemed ambitious when vested with wider powers to replace the Great Ouse River Board in 1964. The board replaced the drainage boards dating back to 1920, which replaced smaller units ... and so on back into shrouded fenland history. The momentum of change gathers pace with the advent of the new Anglian Water Authority bringing a new dimension not only to water and drainage but sewage as well 74 03 15

1975 10 11

Denver Sluice, one of the great monuments of fenland engineering and a vital control point in the flood threats of the past, could soon be something of a white elephant. Its fate hinges on an investigation being carried out into the level of silt build-up in the Great Ouse river basin which the sluice may have limited power to control. The river systems increasing use for fresh water supplies through Grafham Water, the Ely-Essex water transfer project and proposals to regulate groundwater levels in the chalk land had reduced river flows and opened the possibility of silt coming in from the Wash.

1977 06 28

A team of Eastern Electricity apprentices are cleaning away about 150 years of soot, cobwebs and grime from the boiler room of the old fen pumping station at Stretham. They hope to restore it almost to the condition it was when the engine began operating in 1831 and are repairing as many of the valves and water level indicators as they can. The apprentices will also install lighting so that visitors will have a better view of the room and lights will also be fitted in one of the boilers to show its interior. The engine, which was last used in the 1940s is a popular tourist attraction

1979 09 17

Eight miles of lodes in the Burwell district could collapse, causing massive flooding, unless £1 million is spent to consolidate them. Not everybody agrees they should be saved. Since fen drainage

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the peat has shrank leaving the banks 15-20 feet high above the surrounding land. If the trendy conservationist lobby is going for strict historical accuracy then it should support a project which reduces the banks, not raise them still further. But they are a vital amenity and one of the few havens of natural beauty in the region. If enough people feel strongly enough and are prepared to back starry-eyed ideas with cash then their conservation must be assured. 79 09 17

1980

1981 06 02

Clay may be excavated from Burwell brick pits as part of a plan to repair the eight miles of Cambridgeshire lodes during the next 20 years. The pits closed in 1971, have flooded and become a nesting place for swans. But now the Anglian Water Authority wants to reopen them. Six five-ton tipper trucks would make 80 trips a day across the fen on temporary roads to keep traffic away from the village 81 06 02

1983 02 28

Most pumping plant in the fens has been renewed with automatically controlled electric motors but some boards fear they are too dependent on mains electric and have made arrangements for farmers' tractors to operate pumps in time of emergency. 'Conservation' is another area of potential conflict: water-courses must be kept clear of aquatic vegetation, which proves unpopular. Progress is not helped by extremists who delight in ignoring all views other than their own 83 02 28 & a and 83 02 28b & c

1985 04 01

Work has started on draining 600 acres of water meadow at Swavesey, described as an extremely valuable wildlife refuge. Cambridge Friends of the Earth say farmers' plans to plough up the meadows to grow grain – when Britain has a massive surplus – are financial madness. Every bit of this increasingly rare type of habitat is precious and they are threatening physical action to save the Cow and Mare Fen. But the Internal Drainage Board say people are worrying unnecessarily. 85 04 01

1987 09 23

A major new tourist attraction at Ely involving the creation of a working scale model of the fenland drainage system could draw thousands of visitors and create badly-needed jobs, two men believe. They have sunk several thousand pounds into a feasibility study and earmarked a potential site for the six-acre development. It would feature a model village and miniature cathedrals as well as working locks and sluices such as the Denver complex. This would allow visitors to understand the water control mechanisms with an elevated viewing area 200 feet long. Now they are looking for financial backing 87 09 23a

1987 11 26

A new pumping station at Upware, commissioned by Swaffham Internal Drainage Board, replaces an old diesel system dating back to 1929. Consulting engineer, Keith Stacey, says it was constructed in seven months by their own direct labour and they are pleased with the result. The new station has the capacity to pump 178 tons of water per minute into the River Cam from 12,000 acres of adjacent fenland. 87 11 26

1990 01 24

Vital improvement work is needed to the fen drain system because of the Greenhouse Effect. Unless work is undertaken scientists fear a repetition of the disastrous 1947 floods. They want to strengthen and heighten the outer barrier banks along the Bedford Rivers from Earith to Denver. The level of the land has steadily dropped in relation to the sea, the peat fen has fallen by about five metres since the banks were built and the Greenhouse Effect is predicted to produce an annual rise in sea level of five mm. If the South Level bank burst it could cause damage totalling £23 million to homes, high-grade agricultural land, roads and railways. A burst on the Middle Level would be more serious because of

the number of homes nearby. The landscape will see small changes as the banks are heightened but in the vastness of the fens these could hardly be said to be significant 90 01 24b

1990 05 30

Rising sea levels bring flood threats – feature – 90 05 30a, b

1990 07 09

Engineering project to protect fens starts; banks along Ouse washes from Earith to Denver will be heightened and strengthened; peat land has fallen five metres since barrier banks were built; a South Level bank burst could cause £23 million damage, Middle Level burst up to £34m. – 90 07 09a